

# Rethinking Teaching: Conceptions of Learning Change and Learning Management

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## Abstract

Promoting excellence in teaching and boosting learners' performance is and has always been the corner stone of education in general and in the foreign language classroom in particular. This article addresses the issue of the problematic way of teaching and catering for students with individual differences for a better interaction. Consequently, instructors are often confused and the questions of which teaching approach or learning theory to adopt often arises. The aim of this article is to explore how a teacher should teach in a foreign language classroom. Should a teacher adopt a learner-centered approach or a teacher-centered one? This paper also provides brief guidance to teachers on how to manage learners' learning styles in the English language classroom for better instructional practices.

**Keywords:** interaction; learner-centered; teacher-centered; instructional practice; teaching/learning process.

## 1. Introduction

We are passing through a great transition. The old is becoming obsolete and new is still in the process of emergence. The old ways of learning and teaching is found to be too rigid and too outdated. A greater opportunity of psychological principle is being truly demanded. It has been urged that the training of the young requires on the part of teacher a deep psychological knowledge.

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Teaching is an active process in which one person shares information with others to provide them with the information to make behavioral changes. Learning is the process of assimilating information with a resultant change in behavior.

## **2. Setting the scene**

Teaching-learning process is the heart of education. It depends on the fulfillment of the aims and objectives of education. It is the most powerful instrument of education to bring about desired changes in the students. In this respect, the question that brings itself into the scene is mainly concerned with the role of the teacher in this process. Therefore, we can ask the following question: how would a teacher among individual differences and from a learner-centered approach teach in a language classroom? Should he/she adapt his/her teaching to the type of learners he/she has got in the classroom or should he/she help them learn?

Students have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. The more thoroughly instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of all of their students. Three categories of diversity that have been shown to have important implications for teaching and learning are differences in students' learning styles (characteristic ways of taking in and processing information), approaches to learning (surface, deep, and strategic), and intellectual development levels (attitudes about the nature of knowledge and how it should be acquired and evaluated). In this regard, only a learner-centered approach can be applied to meet students' needs. The author in [1] goes on to say that:

"It is only the teacher who can develop a learner-centered classroom. It would, however, be realistic to suggest that the pendulum of education has swung and continues to swing in the direction of second language learner; of any age, as the most significant variable in the process of learning [1: 2].

## **3. Previous studies**

Studies have shown that greater learning may occur when teaching styles match learning styles than when they are mismatched, but the point of identifying learning styles is not to label individual students and tailor instruction to fit their preferences. To function effectively, students will need skills characteristic of each type of learner. For example, the powers of observation and attention to detail of the sensor, and the imagination and abstract thinking ability of the intuit, or the abilities to comprehend information presented both visually and verbally, the systematic analysis skills of the sequential learner, and the multidisciplinary synthesis skills of the global learner, and so on. If instruction is heavily biased toward one category of a learning style dimension, mismatched students may be too uncomfortable to learn effectively, while the students whose learning styles match the teaching style will not be helped to develop critical skills in their less preferred learning style categories. The optimal teaching style is a balanced one that sometimes matches students' preferences, so their discomfort level is not too great for them to learn effectively, and sometimes goes against their preferences, forcing them to stretch and grow in directions they might be inclined to avoid if given the option. In fact, there is more than one way to teach information to students. Some teachers prefer to use a teacher centered approach,

while others feel that a student-centered method is more effective. While these two approaches are different, they share the same common goals of educating students in the course material. A teacher does not have to simply choose one approach or another; he can blend aspects of both methods together and use that to create his own lesson plan. This article is going to focus on two main teaching methods to answer the previously mentioned question. In this respect, the constructivist method and the differentiated instruction method are to be given a great importance. Before getting started making a clear-cut distinction between learner-centered and teacher-centered pedagogy is highly important.

#### **4. Learner-centered or teacher-centered**

The distinction between learner- and teacher-centered pedagogy is often made with reference to the distribution of expertise and authority in the classroom. Traditional teacher-centered pedagogy is generally defined as a style in which the teacher assumes primary responsibility for the communication of knowledge to students. From this view, because teachers command greater expertise about the subject matter, they are in the best position to decide the structure and content of any given classroom experience. Teacher-centered pedagogy is usually understood to involve the use of the lecture as a primary means of communication in the classroom. The goal of the classroom involves the dissemination of a relatively fixed body of knowledge that is determined by the teacher. The lecture format is generally assumed to proceed in a unilateral fashion; the teacher elaborates upon a given body of knowledge from his or her own expert perspective rather than building the content of classroom communication around questions that students might have. Drawing upon [2], the authors in [3] defined teacher-centered instruction as follows:

The teacher (a) is the dominant leader who establishes and enforces rules in the classroom; (b) structures learning tasks and establishes the time and method for task completion; (c) states, explains and models the lesson objectives and actively maintains student on-task involvement; (d) responds to students through direct, right/wrong feedback, uses prompts and cues, and, if necessary, provides correct answers; (e) asks primarily direct, recall-recognition questions and few inferential questions; (f) summarizes frequently during and at the conclusion of a lesson; and (g) signals transitions between lesson points and topic areas [3: 366]. Teacher-centered pedagogy is often described as being based upon a model of an active teacher and a passive student. In contrast, learner-centered education is based upon the idea of an active student. From this view, the teacher does not function as the primary source of knowledge in the classroom. Instead, the professor is viewed as a facilitator or —coach who assists students who are seen as the primary architects of their learning. The authors in [3] described learner-centered pedagogy as follows:

(a) teachers are a catalyst or helper to students who establish and enforce their own rules; (b) teachers respond to student work through neutral feedback and encourage students to provide alternative/additional responses, (c) teachers ask mostly divergent questions and few recall questions, (d) students are allowed to select the learning task and the manner and order in which it is completed, (e) students are presented with examples of the content to be learned and are encouraged to identify the rule of behavior embedded in the content. (f) students are encouraged to summarize and review important lesson objectives throughout the lesson and the conclusion of the activity; (g) students are encouraged to choose new activities in the session and select different topics for

study, and (h) students signal their readiness for transition to the next learning set [3: 366-367]. Student- or learner-centered education has its origins in constructivist developmental theory [4], [5], [6] [7]) and in the progressive education movement in the early part of the 20th century [8]. Constructivism refers to the idea that individuals construct their understanding of the world as a product of their actions on the world. The constructivist approach has important implications for teaching and learning. If individuals construct their understanding of the world through action, then there is no way to simply —teach or— give students knowledge. All new knowledge is constructed on the basis of existing knowledge. As a result, any attempt to teach a novel concept must take into consideration the student's existing ways of understanding the domain in question. A good teacher is one who is able to engage the student's existing ways of knowing and introduce novelty in such a way as to prompt transformation in the structure and content of a student's knowledge and skills. Further, if students construct knowledge through action, then it becomes important to provide students with an opportunity to engage in the types of action that will allow them to construct for themselves the knowledge at hand. From this view, to learn is to invent; if students are to engage in genuine learning, they will have to perform the actions that will lead to deep understanding of the concepts in question. Because students will always assimilate novel experience according to their existing knowledge and developmental level, a teacher can never directly teach new concepts. The best that a teacher can do is to provide students with learning opportunities and direction. The constructivist teacher thus relinquishes his role as the expert or focal point in the classroom. Instead, he operates as a facilitator or coach who designs learning activities through which students will create organized structures of knowledge. In teaching and learning, it is not only enough to use flexible instruction, but differentiated instruction is also important. The author in [9] concluded that differentiated instruction offers various learning instructional choices towards different readiness of students in the classroom. In differentiated instruction, teachers try to involve students in their own ways and own potency in learning. It becomes an effective way for teachers to deliver meaningful instruction. Consequently, in differentiated instruction, every student is possible to do the same thing in the same time, but use the same way. Its instruction is not a set of strategies, but it is a belief of the teacher to show a proactive way toward diversity of students in the classroom. Moreover, the author in [10] stated that in applying differentiated instruction, teachers implement the multi intelligences that affect students' development. When flexibility of teachers in positioning their own roles and differentiated instruction they used in the classroom are combined together to facilitate students' learning, it becomes a great potency to reduce diversity of students in learning. Students also may find happiness and readiness in learning in their own potency. Flexible and differentiated instruction would place teacher roles more effective in delivering the lesson and place student role more flexible in conducting their learning in their own way. It is not important to dichotomize between learner-centered instruction and teacher-centered instruction. If teachers are in the classroom, they are impossible to only use learner-centered instruction but also use teacher-centered instruction. The flexibility of both instructions is dependent on teacher's competence to elaborate classroom circumstance. Here, the author in [11] concluded that to reduce the gap in heterogeneous classrooms, and to develop equitable classrooms, teachers need to build equal-status, flexible instruction among students working together in small learning groups. This condition invites teachers to understand and to implement pedagogical instruction with flexible and differentiated instruction in their own ways based on the range and diversity of students' intellectual competence and try to develop students' potency. Additionally, in order to re-conceive the dichotomy of teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness, the

authors in [12] adopted a more integrated and comprehensive approach, by analyzing both public interactions in the form of whole class discussion and interpersonal interactions that took place between teacher and student and between student and student during between-desk-instruction. Because of the condition, the authors [13] stated that the teacher can still encourage students to actively generate knowledge through creating proper and integrated dimensions of variation although the whole class teaching is under the teacher's control. Thus, it seems to suggest that creating certain dimensions of variation is crucial for effective knowledge generation in large classrooms. The integration of learner centered and teacher centered in a classroom is difficult to be avoided to instruct students well. Creating a learner-centered classroom is a response to the problem created when a student's learning style differs from the teacher's teaching style. The way a teacher presents subject matter may conflict with students' ideas about learning, thus resulting in no learning. Therefore, it is the teacher's duty to respect individual learner differences and to assist the students in discovering their own learning processes and preferences. It requires putting students at the center of classroom organization and respecting their needs, strategies, and styles. In a learner-centered environment, students become autonomous learners, which accelerate the language learning process. A learner-centered environment is communicative and authentic. It trains students to work in small groups or pairs and to negotiate meaning in a broad context. In this respect, several studies [14], [15], [16] have suggested that the negotiation of meaning develops students' communicative competence, and provides comprehensible input, and provided an accurate summary:

The teacher-dominated classroom ("teacher-fronted") is characterized by the teacher's speaking most of the time, leading activities, and constantly passing judgment on student performance, whereas in a highly student-centered classroom, students will be observed working individually or in pairs and small groups, each on distinct tasks and projects. In short, a student-centered environment becomes a solution to student and teacher differences by providing the learner with more autonomy and control. The only caveat is that students may become out of control in a student-centered classroom, and conflicts about learning may arise between teachers and learners. The researcher in [17] covered the problematic situation that emerges when teacher methodology goes against what students believe is appropriate. Introducing a learner-centered environment requires more than one single adaptation of a traditional classroom. It is known that moving from explicit to implicit instruction and from controlled to free language production would require several changes. The techniques chosen would have to support the development of a learner-centered environment while maintaining classroom control and providing students with a rationale for the changes. Overall, a teacher may try to utilize interactive activities of the communicative approach, which gave students opportunities to use the target language. He/she also encourages student contributions to lesson planning and presentation, which got them involved in teaching the class. Finally, he/she wants them to take more responsibility for their own learning.

## **5. Implications and recommendations**

Students' enhancement of their learning is determined by the way teachers use to tutor their students. In this respect, the approaches, methods and techniques teachers use highly affect the learning process in general and the students' development in particular. For this reason, teachers are recommended to opt for a learner-centered approach in their teaching. By so doing, learners are expected to sharpen their learning skills. This can be achieved by implementing strategies and skills, in the learning environment, that can show them how to learn on

their own, and therefore become responsible for their learning. It is also advisable for teachers to rely on a learner-centered approach which can cater for students' learning differences, take into account their learning styles, and account for their needs, too. It is, then, required that the learning methods, teaching strategies, methods and techniques should revolve around the learner as the central point in the teaching and learning process. More importantly, the learning conditions and atmosphere are to be to put the student centered applications and the needs of students. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to involve learners in the learning process by adapting them to the last part of the Confucius saying 'I did, and I understood' (551- 479 BC). This implies that teachers should opt for activities that trigger learners to learn by doing. Therefore, using a learner-centered approach helps students significantly develop and strengthen not only their learning skills, but also life-long skills. This will probably make the learning process more enjoyable.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article has explained how a teacher should teach why and how we created a learner-centered classroom in a teacher education program. It is believed that such an environment can be achieved in any classroom context. In fact, learner-centered classroom setup does not rely on preset formulas or magical recipes; rather, it requires involving students in the teaching process. We discovered that success meant slowly implementing new techniques and thereby adapting students so they would understand lesson goals and objectives, value communicative tasks and activities, generate topics and choose materials, work cooperatively, and identify their own learning strategies and styles. A successful learner-centered environment also requires frequent student feedback. What should be emphasized is that learner-centered methods should proceed in a moderate, adaptive pace. We should help students who are accustomed to a teacher-fronted classroom to accept a change in classroom organization so they may gain the benefits of being at the center of the learning process.

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